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A Children's History of Butte Tugs at the Heart Strings

"There was the fear that they were going to lay off everybody and even shut the mines down for a couple of years, then bring in all of these people from outside who don't know any better to go through everything we did. Only we'll have lost our homes, our history, and all that stuff."

■ Bonnie Stefanic on growing up in Butte in the 1950s

Bonnie heard the fears of her parents and their friends "whispered" as the men gathered in the front room and the women in the kitchen, she said, the kids were supposed to stay out of the way, and it "was like walking on eggshells."

"Then once the strike happened, it meant the men would be out of work, and that meant they drank all day long. There was no money. The woman was angry and the guy was angry, and it was an ugly, violent cycle," she said.

History that comes alive is a much overused phrase. It also is a phrase that doesn't go far enough in describing Janet Finn's new book published by the Montana Historical Society Press "Mining Childhood: Growing Up in Butte, Montana, 1900-1960."

Taken from interviews and using the actual words of those who grew up with the Mining City the book takes you from the highs of helping put up the circus tent for free tickets to the lows of a dad who never came home from the mines and the women and kids that struggled to survive without him.

"It seemed like all families had kids. There were kids all over. In fact, the houses were almost skin to skin, and, boy, there was kids all over in the neighborhood. You knew everybody, and you knew who lived here and who lived there," Ray Wayrenen said.

The social history of Butte reflects the “melting pot” of the United States and stands as a strong lesson for how children bear the brunt of fitting into a new way of life. “We were surrounded by different nationalities. We had Vankoviches and Joseviches and Biviches, and we had Serbians, and we had Chinese. We had italianos, espanolas, and Mexican people. We had the whole United Nations around on the East Side,” Lula Martinez, whose parents came from Mexico said.

Steve Sherick was born in Butte in 1935 to a miner who had changed his Croatian name from Seric to fit into his new country. In her interview with Sherick, Finn shows how new and old world thinking were both part of the Butte fabric of life. After his mother, who was born Slovenian, met her soon to be husband, she and her mother was concerned about a “mixed” marriage and went to see a local fortune teller to ask if it would be a good match.

The fortune teller offered a little insight, but said it would take more money to get the full story, “so they went home, and my grandma had a twenty-dollar gold piece,” Sherick said. The fortune teller put the coin in a bandana and “puts it into her bosom. When she got done with the fortune, she takes this silk bandana out, unties it, and the twenty-dollar gold piece is gone. All that’s in it is dust,” he said. That’s how Sherick says his parents decided to get married.

In a fascinating story that includes how his father learned to speak “Mexican” when he got a job working with a Mexican crew, Sherick talks about home life. “My mother would know what time he’d be getting home, and she’d say go get the beer.” She would give him a quarter and a bucket to put the beer in. “I had to reach up pretty high to get that bucket up on the bar. I delivered a lot of beer,” Sherick remembers.

Ray Wayrenen remembers the hard lessons children learned about the early struggles of labor unions in Butte. “The National Guard had machine guns. I remember one time in 1919 or 1920 when a

Finn fellow came running off the hill on East Broadway with blood running down his neck from a bullet wound,” he said.

John Sheehy recalls that when he graduated from high school in 1936 that he knew he “would probably head for the mines as all my neighbors did.”

“We were very clannish and very aware of the fact that we were not high mucky mucks. It is kind of hard to describe,” he said.”In September, right about a day before college opened, my father came in and said, ‘You’ve got to go to college.’ Just like that.” Sheehy went on to become a justice of the Montana Supreme Court.

From playing on slag heaps, to swimming in water that could eat holes in your clothes, to the countless ways they found to make some money to help out the family, the stories take you back to a time when life in Montana and all of the country was far different.

“Butte provides a dynamic setting for examining how children fit into the seemingly adult world of labor, immigration, urbanization, and industrial capitalism that shaped the social, cultural and economic contours of early-twentieth-century America,” Finn said.

The stories alone are worth the read, but Finn uses her skillful research and writing style to tell a broader story of how Butte and the United States grew up in the first half of the 20th century.

“In sum, while accounts of children and experiences of childhood have largely been relegated to the margins of Butte’ story, children themselves have been central to Butte’s history. They were, quite simply, Butte’s reason to be. Copper was merely the means to support them,” Finn concludes.

Janet Finn is Professor of Social Work at the University of Montana and has written and edited numerous books and articles about Butte, and childhood. She grew up in Butte in the 1960s.

Mining Childhood is available at local bookstores, or can be ordered directly from MHS by calling toll-free 1-800-243-9900, or online at www.montanahistoricalsociety.org. The 336-page book sells for \$24.95 in paperback.